

THE PRECIOUS OCEAN OF AMAZING FAITH:
 THE HISTORY AND PRACTICES OF
 CHUMPONG *MANI LHAKHANG* (TEMPLE)

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Introduction

This paper presents the history of the *mani lhakhang* of Chumpong (gCong phung) village in West Sikkim and the practices related to it. The importance of this temple is not obvious but whosoever enters and looks around will notice its religious and cultural value and will respect it as a great *lhakhang*. Nothing has ever been written about the importance of this particular village temple and its rituals performed by the elderly women of its village.

Chumpong village is itself an important location, which was on numerous occasions blessed by high lamas. In the *lHa btsun 'Jigs med dpa' bo bka' 'bum*² text, it is mentioned that “[b]etween Pad+ma yang rtse and sGrub sde gSang sngags rdo rje gdan [near Yog bsam] lays a resting place”, which, the elders in the village explained to me as being Chumpong. Only then did I realise the importance of the village and its temple and started collecting information about it from 2007.

The blessing of Chumpong

Chumpong village is located in West Sikkim near Pemayangtse (Padma g.yang rtse) monastery. Chumpong’s original name was Dechen Kyishong (bDe chen skyid gshongs) or the ‘Valley of Great Joy’. Chumpong belongs to the same revenue block as the village of Nako (Na kog). Nako’s original name was Norbu Kyishong (Nor bu skyid gshongs), or the ‘Valley of Gems’.

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² 1735.

In his biography, Jigme Pawo—the third lHa btsun chen po³ rDzogs chen 'Jigs med dpa' bo—explains that he arrived at Yoksam (Yog bsam) on the 25th day of the 10th month of the Earth Female Ox year (1709). On the 26th, he met the lamas of surrounding monasteries together with the Bhutia people of the area, visited Dubdi (sGrub sde) monastery on the 27th and then offered tea for a daily ritual in all the surrounding monasteries. On the second day of the 11th month, on his way to Pemayangtse where he had been invited by the 3rd Chogyal Chagdor Namgyal (Phyag rdor nam rgyal), Jigme Pawo stayed for one night in a village called Dechen Kyishong.⁴ As we have seen, this was Chumpong's original name.

On the 3rd day, Pema Karwang (Phyag mdzod Pad+ma gar dbang), the treasurer of Pemayangtse received him halfway. According to the History of Sikkim by Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma ('*Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* by mThu stobs nam rgyal and Ye shes sgröl ma)⁵ the meeting between the two men took place in Chumpong. Pema Karwang received Jigme Pawo with incense and a ceremonial scarf at a pond (*chu mig can*) in Chumpong. According to oral sources, this pond would have been at the place called Kongchu (sKong chu), which is to the left of the *lhakhang*. An important lake was previously located there but the lake has since disappeared due to bad deeds and lack of care. Nowadays, this place is very steep. From there, the way divides into two paths, one leading to Pemayangtse and the other to Pelling (Pad gling).

A short history of Chumpong mani lhakhang

This temple is believed to be very old and a place of great bliss. Indeed, as mentioned above, Jigme Pawo rested in Chumpong while he was travelling from Dubdi to Pemayangtse. He mentions in his biography⁶ that he rested on a flat stone which he used as a natural throne. The temple of Chumpong is located near this stone, which is nowadays called '*tsao tara*', which means 'resting place' in Nepali. As the temple is known as 'Tukshe Gonpa', its surrounding area is called 'Tukshe Gonpa Tsao tara'.

³ 1735: 270.

⁴ In a house belonging to a villager called Mr dBang drag; we don't know where it is today.

⁵ 2003: 70 line 11.

⁶ 1735.

In former times, one of the Chogyals⁷ built this temple together with the villagers. They chose the location because of the presence of the stone where Jigme Pawo had rested. They built the temple more generally for the benefit of the Dharma and particularly for the benefit of the six classes of beings. The king and the villagers started by giving some land to the temple which is today about 20 acres in area.

The temple was rebuilt in 1970 (Iron Dog year) by the villagers of Nako and Chumpong, and when the villagers collected donations for this purpose, Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal (dPal ldan don sgrub rNam rgyal) added Rs400—which was a large amount at that time.⁸ While the construction was ongoing, the Chogyal paid a visit to Chumpong village. The villagers invited him to the *mani lhakhang* and presented him with the dishes of hospitality (lk. *gsol chang chang gyu*). The king saw that furniture was needed to complete the construction and again offered Rs200. He also explained the rules to be followed in the temple: that water and prostrations should be offered daily (*phyags mchod*), that a fasting-ritual (*smyung gnas*) should be held three times per year, and that recitation of the mantra ‘*Om ma ni padme hung*’ should be held on the eighth (*tshes brgyad*), fifteenth (*tshes bco lnga*) and thirtieth day (*gnam gang*) of each month.⁹

In 1990 (Iron Sheep year), the temple was badly damaged when a tree fell on it due to a strong wind. Villagers collected donations¹⁰ and completed the repairs the same year.

In 1993 (Wood Dog year), the villagers decided to completely rebuild the *mani lhakhang*, collected donations for this purpose and received additional support from the Ecclesiastical Department. The collection was organised by Tobgay Mandal, a resident of Nako and the temple was completed a few years later. Mr Karma Lhundrub, a resident of Chumpong, was the main sponsor of the altar; Mr Tshering Dondrub, a member of the same family, donated the temple’s electrical installations.

The religious articles of the temple

On the temple’s main altar, Chenrezig (sPyan ras gzigs) occupies the central place, while Manjushri (’Jam dpal dbyang) is on the right side

⁷ This could be the third Chogyal Chagdor Namgyal or the fourth, Gyurme Namgyal since both were close to Jigme Pawo.

⁸ Information found in the Ecclesiastical Department’s *mani lhakhang* file.

⁹ The ritual calendar will be detailed hereafter.

¹⁰ Some villagers gave money while other gave wood for the repairs.

and Vajrapani (Phyag na rdo rje) on the left. Numerous small statues surround them: two statues of Jampayang ('Jam dbyang), three statues of Buddha, one of 'eleven-headed Chenrezig' (bCu gcig zhal), one of Tara (sGrol ma) and one of the Fifth Karmapa.

There are sixteen volumes of the 'Bum, which were donated by a villager from Ben named Sangay Gyatso (gSang sngags rGya mtsho) and a woman from Chumpong named Tsengay Palden (Tshang rgyas dpal ldan).

A few years earlier, a village committee was set up to look after the *mani lhakhang* and its rituals together with all the other cultural and religious events taking place in the village. This committee, called the 'Congregation of Joyful Youth' (gZhan nu skyid gshongs tshogs pa), is made of one member-representative from each village household. The committee offered one pair of long ritual brass trumpets (*ra dung*), one pair of short horns (*rgya gling*) and one pair of drums (*zang rnga*). The list of ancient articles is as follows: seven copper bowls, seven brass bowls, ten brass containers for butter lamps, a small wood printing block for prayer flags, one big drum (*rnga*), one pair of flat cymbals, one *rdo rje* and one bell, one silver ring for rice offerings, one pair of conch shells, one round cymbal, and one flute. In 1997 (Earth Tiger year), Mr Tshering Namgyal Denjongpo (Tshe ring rNam rgyal 'Bras ljong po) from Gangtok (sGang tog) offered 108 containers for butter lamps.

The temple is used by the elderly women of the village who make up a community called the 'Grandmothers of the Temple' (*nya mo lha khang*). These women perform monthly and annual rituals led by the fasting-ritual guide (*smyung gnas blam*) in the case of the fasting-rituals (*smyung gnas*), or by the temple's head-lama (*dpon slob*) in the case of the other rituals. The villagers' committee looks after the material functioning of the temple and nominates its caretaker.

Entrance to the 'Grandmothers of the Temple' (nya mo lha khang) community

Before entering this community, a 'grandmother' should receive the vows necessary for the fasting-ritual (called *smyung gnas sdom pa*) from a high-ranking rinpoche. Then, the first day she enters the village *lhakhang* she has to offer a 'feast offering' (*tshogs*) together with butter lamps (*mchod me*), and sponsor that day's lunch for all the grandmothers and provide the items needed for the head-lama's ritual (*zhabs tog*). She has to bring all the required items for the day: six kilos of butter, eight kilos of cheese, and forty kilos of rice. Only after this

can she join the other ‘grandmothers’ for the regular monthly rituals. She will, however, sit at the end of the bench where these ladies sit.

About those in charge of the lhakhang: the head-lama (dpon slob), the caretaker (dkon gnyer), and the fasting-ritual guide (smyung gnas blam)

To become the *mani lhakhang* head-lama, one should be the possessor of at least one of the three capacities (*rab* ‘bring *tha ma*): an excellent one (*rab*)—one who is a celibate monk (*dge slong*)—an intermediate one (*’bring*)—one who has taken one of the *prātimoksa* vows and has practiced at least one fasting-ritual—or an inferior one (*tha ma*)—one who is able to write and read the ritual texts and knows the liturgy.

As for the caretaker (*dkon gnyer*), the committee collects donations from Nako and Chumpong villagers in order to pay his yearly salary. The wealthy give Rs500 per house, middle class people give Rs200 and the poorest give Rs100. The present head-lama combines the capacities of head-lama and caretaker of the temple. He is a lama of Pemayangtse monastery named Tsampo Karma (mTsham po Kar+ma).

As for the previous caretakers, around 1988 a Bhutanese pilgrim arrived at Chumpong and took charge as caretaker of the temple. He soon entered into a dispute with the villagers about the temple’s landed property. After some time, the villagers searched for another caretaker and eventually found another Bhutanese man. Around the year 2000, the latter went to a sponsor’s house to perform a ritual (*mDo mang*) and died there from a disease he had previously contracted. The villagers organised a grand funeral and a forty-nine day ritual for him.

As for the fasting-ritual guide (*smyung gnas blam*), in 1980, a lama from Bhutan named Zhung Lam (*gZhung blam*) led several fasting-rituals (*smyung gnas*). Currently, Sonam Phuntshog (*bSod nams phun tshogs*) from Pemayangtse monastery holds the position.

Monthly rituals in the mani lhakhang.

Three times a month, the eldest women of the village of Nako, Chumpong and Arithang gather in the temple with its head-lama. On the eighth and the thirtieth day of each month, they make feast offerings (*tshogs*) and butter lamp offerings (*mchod me*) with goods brought from their own homes. They also bring rice, milk, butter, cheese, vegetables, biscuits, etc. for the single meal they take during these days. They recite the mantra ‘*OM ma ni padme hung*’ for the whole day. In the morning, the head-lama offers fumigation (*bsang*)

and ‘golden drink libations’ (*gser skyems*) to the deities. Then, he recites complete ritual texts.¹¹

On the 15th, they perform the *gNas gsol*, the ritual propitiation of the sacred land. They organise it in turns, with two elder ladies taking charge of each ritual. On that day, they recite the *Rig ’zin srog sgrub* (Lhatsun Chenpo’s treasure text revealed in Sikkim) and prepare cake offerings or *tormas* (*gtor ma*) of the deities of this text. They also recite the *gNas gsol* text and offer fumigation (*bsang*) and drinks to the deities.

Annual rituals

Three times a year, the eldest women of the village perform a fasting-ritual: during the first, the fourth and the ninth months of the Tibetan lunar calendar. If they can, they perform sixteen days of fasting; otherwise, they do only eight.

1. *Drug pa tshes bzhi* (sixth month)

On the 4th day of the sixth month, they perform *Drug pa tshes bzhi* sponsored by one of the eldest women of the village named Ama Dolma (A ma sGrol ma, dByib shing Anyo).

On the fifth month, they practice an important ritual for villagers called Chirim (sPyi rim or Nyin log, samsaric ritual). On this occasion, a ‘collector’ (called *rgya dpon*) collects a sample of different grains (*phi tab*, rice and maize) from the villagers and brings it to the *lhakhang*. Then the committee collects donations of Rs20 per house. This money is used for the feast offering and the butter lamps. For this occasion, eight lamas of the village perform the ‘hundred offering’ (*tshogs brgya*) and one exorcism ritual (*gtor zlog*) based on the text *Drag po sde bzhi*. On this day, all the villagers bring coins and different seeds after having passed them around their bodies in order to remove obstacles. These coins and seeds are placed next to the ransom effigies and are thrown away together.

2. *’Bum bskor* (second month)

On the 15th day of the second month, the sixteen volumes of *’Bum* are carried from Pemayangtse monastery to a village called Zindrang (Zin da rang) by its villagers. The books are carried in a procession led by

¹¹ *sMon lam* as well as *sKyabs thugs rje bdag nyid* written by dNgul chu D+har ma b+ha dra and *Thugs rje chen po yi ge drug pa* by Drub chen Thang stong rGyal po.

Pemayangtse ‘cooks’ (*ma byan*; called *zu nar bo*, i.e. players of the *zu nar* musical instrument, for this occasion) playing ritual music, and lamas from Pemayangtse. One householder in Zindrang is the sponsor of the day where the lamas perform a whole day ritual (*tshogs brgya*). The text are kept in the sponsor’s house for the night where the lamas and ‘cooks’ also stay.

On the 16th day, the sixteen volumes are carried to another village called Zingyang (Zin sgyang) where, as in Zindrang, rituals are held in the sponsor’s house where texts and religious practitioners also stay for the night.

On the 17th day, villagers from Nako-Chumpong carry the ‘*Bum*’ from Zingyang to their village. On that day, the ‘Grandmothers of the Temple’ offer tea and snacks to the participants. The ‘*Bum*’ carriers circumambulate the temple once before entering it. The text is kept here for a short time where the lamas recite sections of it. Then they go to the village sponsor’s house, where the same procedure is followed as in the previous villages.

3. *gNas gsol* (seventh month)

The *gNas gsol* (‘Propitiation of the Sacred Land’) is performed by two or three lamas (or *mchod gnas*) from Pemayangtse monastery. Early in the morning on the 8th day of the seventh month, they blow flutes (*rkan gling*) from each corner of the main temple of Pemayangtse, and then leave for Chumpong. Half way, they blow the flutes three times so that Chumpong villagers will hear them. The latter then prepare some tea near the *lhakhang* and offer fumigation (*bsang*).¹² After having received these offerings, a lama performs a ‘request’ (*zhal len*) to the local deities (lHa srin bde brgyad) along with an offering of *chang*. Then, they enter the temple where they remain the whole day performing a ritual (*tshes brgyad*) with the ‘grandmothers’ reciting the mantra ‘*OM ma ni padme hung*’.

Early next morning, the lamas engage porters to carry the *chang* and rice collected from villagers (called *chang phud chum phud*) in the direction of Yoksam and leave with them. When they arrive at a place named Tingting Gang (Ting ting sgyang), the villagers of Yoksam welcome them with tea and snacks. They then proceed to Chorten Norbu Gang (mChod rten Nor bu sgyang) where the first Chogyal of Sikkim is said to have been enthroned. They prepare the *tormas* for the performance of next day’s 10th day (*tshes bcu*) rituals (*tshogs brgya*).

¹² This offering to the lamas is called *gsol chang chang gyu*.

On the 11th day, they go to Tsoka (mTsho kha), a place located one day's walk away from Yoksam in the direction of Kangchendzonga (Gangs chen mdzod lnga).

On the 12th day, they go to Dzongri (rDzong ri), further away in the direction of the mountain. They take one day's rest on the 13th, and on the 14th, prepare the *tormas* (*gNas gsol*) with the rice previously collected from Nako, Chumpong and Yoksam.

On the 15th day, they perform the *gNas gsol* and *Rig 'dzin srog sgrub* rituals and make a 'golden drink libation' (*gser skyems*) with the *chang* collected from the villages.

Budget of the temple

Since 2003, the Ecclesiastical Department of Sikkim has given Rs3000 per year to the temple, as it has to all of the temples of Sikkim. The yearly expenses for 2006 were two hundred and twenty-five kilos of oil for the butter lamps, five kilos of butter, rice and dye for the cake offerings, dye for the butter, fruit for the offerings, cheese, butter, vegetables, grains, tea, snacks and pay for the eight lamas who performed Chirim. The total expenses for the year amounted to more than Rs35,000.

Until the year 2000, part of these expenses was covered by the villagers' contribution and a portion of the proceeds of the cardamom cultivated on the mani lhakhang's land. Fifty percent of the crops would go for the allowance of the caretaker and fifty percent went towards the ritual expenses. However, the cardamom crops having failed since the year 2000, the full expenses, including the caretaker's allowance, are now born by the villagers.

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